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"The Year in Review"

I hope that everyone in North Florida is having a safe and happy holiday season. With the new year upon us, I would like to take a moment to reflect on Congress' achievements during my first year in Washington, and to look ahead at what is to come in the next year's session of Congress.

For a quarter of a century, Congress has failed to pass a balanced budget. Fortunately, this summer I joined the majority of Congress and the President in producing a budget that both balances and addresses the needs of hard working American families.

This year's budget agreement provides desperately needed tax relief for our nation's working families. The agreement gives over one million Florida families a \$500 tax break for each child. Nearly every family with children, that earns less than \$130,000 a year, will get the tax relief they need. In addition, for families struggling to save enough money to send their children to college, the agreement provides several education tax breaks which will make higher education more affordable for all families. The HOPE Scholarship and the Lifetime Learning tax credits will allow 566,000 Florida students at all levels of higher education to receive substantial tax credits off of their tuition expenses. Among other benefits for working families, the budget agreement establishes new IRAs specifically for education expenses, and allows for an income tax deduction of up to \$2,500 a year for interest paid on student loans.

In addition, Congress took its first step toward providing health insurance for the 10 million children in the U.S. who are not covered by including in the agreement \$24 billion over five years for children's health care, with \$270 million of that funding going to Florida's children next year. This represents the single largest investment in health care for children since the passage of Medicaid in 1965, and I am proud to have been a part.

The budget agreement also grants extensive tax relief to small business owners and family farmers. For example, the agreement provides estate tax relief that more than doubles the amount that family farmers and small business owners can leave to their heirs without paying a costly federal estate tax. As a fifth generation farmer, I realize how important family owned small businesses are to North Florida's economy. I worked closely with my colleagues to ensure that this provision was included in the final agreement. In addition, I am pleased that our small businesses and family farms will also benefit from a significant reduction in the capital gains rate.

This year, I was also proud to have been one of several advocates in Congress for increasing our Veterans Budget. For fiscal year 1998, Congress has allocated an increase of \$212.5 million from last year, a remarkable accomplishment considering the number of budget cutbacks and program reductions that are taking place.

While this session of Congress has proven quite successful, there is still much to be done. Now

that we are on the road to a balanced budget, it is important to begin reducing the federal debt. Our nation is currently five trillion dollars in debt, and I believe the next step Congress should take is to begin to pay down the debt so our children and grandchildren are not saddled with this crushing burden.

This year, the House passed legislation which, if signed into law, will dramatically reform the way the Internal Revenue Service operates by developing a panel of citizens to help manage the agency and changing the burden of proof in tax cases from the taxpayer to the IRS. However, making the IRS accountable to the citizens it serves is just the first step. Congress must make our tax code more simple and fair. The House leadership has made it clear that they intend to bring tax reform legislation to the floor for debate. I look forward to engaging in that debate.

I am eager to take up these and many other challenges in the next session of Congress. I look forward to hearing from the citizens of North Florida in 1998, and I hope that you all have a happy and prosperous new year.